

CHAPTER XXVIII

MEMORY TRAINING

Lulled in the countless chambers of the brain,
Our thoughts are linked by many a hidden chain;
Awake but one, and lo! what myriads rise!
Each stamps its image as the other flies!

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Hail, memory, hail! in thy exhaustless mine
From age to age unnumber'd treasures shine!
Thought and her shadowy brood thy call obey,
And Place and Time are subject to thy sway!

—SAMUEL ROGERS, *Pleasures of Memory*.

Many an orator, like Thackeray, has made the best part of his speech to himself—on the way home from the lecture hall. Presence of mind—it remained for Mark Twain to observe—is greatly promoted by absence of body. A hole in the memory is no less a common complaint than a distressing one.

Henry Ward Beecher was able to deliver one of the world's greatest addresses at Liverpool because of his excellent memory. In speaking of the occasion Mr. Beecher said that all the events, arguments and appeals that he had ever heard or read or written seemed to pass before his mind as oratorical weapons, and standing there he had but to reach forth his hand and "seize the weapons as they went smoking by." Ben Jonson could repeat all he had written. Scaliger memorized the Iliad in three weeks. Locke says: "Without memory, man is a perpetual infant." Quintilian and Aristotle regarded it as a measure of genius.

Now all this is very good. We all agree that a reliable memory is an invaluable possession for the speaker. We never dissent for a moment when we are solemnly told that his memory should be a storehouse from which at

pleasure he can draw facts, fancies, and illustrations. But can the memory be trained to act as the warder for all the truths that we have gained from thinking, reading, and experience? And if so, how? Let us see.

Twenty years ago a poor immigrant boy, employed as a dish washer in New York, wandered into the Cooper Union and began to read a copy of Henry George's "Progress and Poverty." His passion for knowledge was awakened, and he became a habitual reader. But he found that he was not able to remember what he read, so he began to train his naturally poor memory until he became the world's greatest memory expert. This man was the late Mr. Felix Berol. Mr. Berol could tell the population of any town in the world, of more than five thousand inhabitants. He could recall the names of forty strangers who had just been introduced to him and was able to tell which had been presented third, eighth, seventeenth, or in any order. He knew the date of every important event in history, and could not only recall an endless array of facts but could correlate them perfectly.

To what extent Mr. Berol's remarkable memory was natural and required only attention, for its development, seems impossible to determine with exactness, but the evidence clearly indicates that, however useless were many of his memory feats, a highly retentive memory was developed where before only "a good forgettery" existed.

The freak memory is not worth striving for, but a good working memory decidedly is. Your power as a speaker will depend to a large extent upon your ability to retain impressions and call them forth when occasion demands, and that sort of memory is like muscle—it responds to training.

What Not to Do

It is sheer misdirected effort to begin to memorize by learning words by rote, for that is beginning to build a pyramid at the apex. For years our schools were cursed by this vicious system—vicious not only because it is inefficient but for the more important reason that it hurts the mind. True,

some minds are natively endowed with a wonderful facility in remembering strings of words, facts, and figures, but such are rarely good reasoning minds; the normal person must belabor and force the memory to acquire in this artificial way.

Again, it is hurtful to force the memory in hours of physical weakness or mental weariness. Health is the basis of the best mental action and the operation of memory is no exception.

Finally, do not become a slave to a system. Knowledge of a few simple facts of mind and memory will set you to work at the right end of the operation. Use these *principles*, whether included in a system or not, but do not bind yourself to a method that tends to lay more stress on the way to remember than on the development of memory itself. It is nothing short of ridiculous to memorize ten words in order to remember one fact.

The Natural Laws of Memory.

Concentrated attention at the time when you wish to store the mind is the first step in memorizing—and the most important one by far. You forgot the fourth of the list of articles your wife asked you to bring home chiefly because you allowed your attention to waver for an instant when she was telling you. Attention may not be concentrated attention. When a siphon is charged with gas it is sufficiently filled with the carbonic acid vapor to make its influence felt; a mind charged with an idea is charged to a degree sufficient to hold it. Too much charging will make the siphon burst; too much attention to trifles leads to insanity. Adequate attention, then, is the fundamental secret of remembering.

Generally we do not give a fact adequate attention when it does not seem important. Almost everyone has seen how the seeds in an apple point, and has memorized the date of Washington's death. Most of us have—perhaps wisely—forgotten both. The little nick in the bark of a tree is healed over and obliterated in a season, but the gashes in the trees around

Gettysburg are still apparent after fifty years. Impressions that are gathered lightly are soon obliterated. Only deep impressions can be recalled at will. Henry Ward Beecher said: "One intense hour will do more than dreamy years." To memorize ideas and words, concentrate on them until they are fixed firmly and deeply in your mind and accord to them their true importance. LISTEN with the mind and you will remember.

How shall you concentrate? How would you increase the fighting-effectiveness of a man-of-war? One vital way would be to increase the size and number of its guns. To strengthen your memory, increase both the number and the force of your mental impressions by attending to them intensely. Loose, skimming reading, and drifting habits of reading destroy memory power. However, as most books and newspapers do not warrant any other kind of attention, it will not do altogether to condemn this method of reading; but avoid it when you are trying to memorize.

Environment has a strong influence upon concentration, until you have learned to be alone in a crowd and undisturbed by clamor. When you set out to memorize a fact or a speech, you may find the task easier away from all sounds and moving objects. All impressions foreign to the one you desire to fix in your mind must be eliminated.

The next great step in memorizing is to *pick out the essentials of the subject*, arrange them in order, and dwell upon them intently. Think clearly of each essential, one after the other. *Thinking* a thing—not allowing the mind to wander to non-essentials—is really memorizing.

Association of ideas is universally recognized as an essential in memory work; indeed, whole systems of memory training have been founded on this principle.

Many speakers memorize only the outlines of their addresses, filling in the words at the moment of speaking. Some have found it helpful to remember an outline by associating the different points with objects in the room. Speaking on "Peace," you may wish to dwell on the cost, the cruelty,

and the failure of war, and so lead to the justice of arbitration. Before going on the platform if you will associate four divisions of your outline with four objects in the room, this association may help you to recall them. You may be prone to forget your third point, but you remember that once when you were speaking the electric lights failed, so arbitrarily the electric light globe will help you to remember “failure.” Such associations, being unique, tend to stick in the mind. While recently speaking on the six kinds of imagination the present writer formed them into an acrostic—*visual, auditory, motor, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile*, furnished the nonsense word *vamgot*, but the six points were easily remembered.

In the same way that children are taught to remember the spelling of teasing words—*separate* comes from *separ*— and as an automobile driver remembers that two C’s and then two H’s lead him into Castor Road, Cottman Street, Haynes Street and Henry Street, so important points in your address may be fixed in mind by arbitrary symbols invented by yourself. The very work of devising the scheme is a memory action. The psychological process is simple: it is one of noting intently the steps by which a fact, or a truth, or even a word, has come to you. Take advantage of this tendency of the mind to remember by association.

Repetition is a powerful aid to memory. Thurlow Weed, the journalist and political leader, was troubled because he so easily forgot the names of persons he met from day to day. He corrected the weakness, relates Professor William James, by forming the habit of attending carefully to names he had heard during the day and then repeating them to his wife every evening. Doubtless Mrs. Weed was heroically longsuffering, but the device worked admirably.

After reading a passage you would remember, close the book, reflect, and repeat the contents—aloud, if possible.

Reading thoughtfully aloud has been found by many to be a helpful memory practise.

Write what you wish to remember. This is simply one more way of increasing the number and the strength of your mental impressions by utilizing *all* your avenues of impression. It will help to fix a speech in your mind if you speak it aloud, listen to it, write it out, and look at it intently. You have then impressed it on your mind by means of vocal, auditory, muscular and visual impressions.

Some folk have peculiarly distinct auditory memories; they are able to recall things heard much better than things seen. Others have the visual memory; they are best able to recall sight-impressions. As you recall a walk you have taken, are you able to remember better the sights or the sounds? Find out what kinds of impressions your memory retains best, and use them the most. To fix an idea in mind, use *every* possible kind of impression.

Daily habit is a great memory cultivator. Learn a lesson from the Marathon runner. Regular exercise, though never so little daily, will strengthen your memory in a surprising measure. Try to describe in detail the dress, looks and manner of the people you pass on the street. Observe the room you are in, close your eyes, and describe its contents. View closely the landscape, and write out a detailed description of it. How much did you miss? Notice the contents of the show windows on the street; how many features are you able to recall? Continual practise in this feat may develop in you as remarkable proficiency as it did in Robert Houdin and his son.

The daily memorizing of a beautiful passage in literature will not only lend strength to the memory, but will store the mind with gems for quotation. But whether by little or much add daily to your memory power by practise.

Memorize out of doors. The buoyancy of the wood, the shore, or the stormy night on deserted streets may freshen your mind as it does the minds of countless others.

Lastly, *cast out fear*. Tell yourself that you *can* and *will* and *do* remember. By pure exercise of selfism assert your mastery. Be obsessed

with the fear of forgetting and you cannot remember. Practise the reverse. Throw aside your manuscript crutches—you may tumble once or twice, but what matters that, for you are going to learn to walk and leap and run.

Memorizing a Speech

Now let us try to put into practise the foregoing suggestions. First, reread this chapter, noting the nine ways by which memorizing may be helped.

Then read over the following selection from Beecher, applying so many of the suggestions as are practicable. Get the spirit of the selection firmly in your mind. Make mental note of—write down, if you must—the *succession* of ideas. Now memorize the thought. Then memorize the outline, the order in which the different ideas are expressed. Finally, memorize the exact wording.

No, when you have done all this, with the most faithful attention to directions, you will not find memorizing easy, unless you have previously trained your memory, or it is naturally retentive. Only by constant practise will memory become strong and only by continually observing these same principles will it remain strong. You will, however, have made a beginning, and that is no mean matter.

THE REIGN OF THE COMMON PEOPLE

I do not suppose that if you were to go and look upon the experiment of self-government in America you would have a very high opinion of it. I have not either, if I just look upon the surface of things. Why, men will say: “It stands to reason that 60,000,000 ignorant of law, ignorant of constitutional history, ignorant of jurisprudence, of finance, and taxes and tariffs and forms of currency—60,000,000 people that never studied these things—are not fit to rule. Your diplomacy is as complicated as ours, and it is the most complicated on earth, for all things grow in complexity as they develop toward a higher condition. What fitness is there in these people? Well, it is not democracy merely; it is a representative democracy. Our people do not vote in mass for anything; they pick out captains of thought, they pick out the men that do know, and they send them to the Legislature to think for them, and then the people afterward ratify or disallow them.

But when you come to the Legislature I am bound to confess that the thing does not look very much more cheering on the outside. Do they really select the best men? Yes; in times of danger they do very generally, but in ordinary time, “kissing goes by favor.” You know what the duty of a regular Republican-Democratic legislator is. It is to get back again next winter. His second duty is what? His second duty is to put himself under that extraordinary providence that takes care of legislators’ salaries. The old miracle of the prophet and the meal and the oil is outdone immeasurably in our days, for they go there poor one year, and go home rich; in four years they become moneylenders, all by a trust in that gracious providence that takes care of legislators’ salaries. Their next duty after that is to serve the party that sent them up, and then, if there is anything left of them, it belongs to the commonwealth. Someone has said very wisely, that if a man traveling wishes to relish his dinner he had better not go into the kitchen to see where it is cooked; if a man wishes to respect and obey the law, he had better not go to the Legislature to see where that is cooked.

HENRY WARD BEECHER.

From a lecture delivered in Exeter Hall, London,
1886, when making his last tour of Great Britain.

In Case of Trouble

But what are you to do if, notwithstanding all your efforts, you should forget your points, and your mind, for the minute, becomes blank? This is a deplorable condition that sometimes arises and must be dealt with. Obviously, you can sit down and admit defeat. Such a consummation is devoutly to be shunned.

Walking slowly across the platform may give you time to grip yourself, compose your thoughts, and stave off disaster. Perhaps the surest and most practical method is to begin a new sentence with your last important word. This is not advocated as a method of composing a speech—it is merely an extreme measure which may save you in tight circumstances. It is like the fire department—the less you must use it the better. If this method is followed very long you are likely to find yourself talking about plum pudding or Chinese Gordon in the most unexpected manner, so of course you will get back to your lines the earliest moment that your feet have hit the platform.

Let us see how this plan works—obviously, your extemporized words will lack somewhat of polish, but in such a pass crudity is better than

failure.

Now you have come to a dead wall after saying: “Joan of Arc fought for liberty.” By this method you might get something like this:

“Liberty is a sacred privilege for which mankind always had to fight. These struggles [Platitude—but push on] fill the pages of history. History records the gradual triumph of the serf over the lord, the slave over the master. The master has continually tried to usurp unlimited powers. Power during the medieval ages accrued to the owner of the land with a spear and a strong castle; but the strong castle and spear were of little avail after the discovery of gunpowder. Gunpowder was the greatest boon that liberty had ever known.”

Thus far you have linked one idea with another rather obviously, but you are getting your second wind now and may venture to relax your grip on the too-evident chain; and so you say:

“With gunpowder the humblest serf in all the land could put an end to the life of the tyrannical baron behind the castle walls. The struggle for liberty, with gunpowder as its aid, wrecked empires, and built up a new era for all mankind.”

In a moment more you have gotten back to your outline and the day is saved.

Practising exercises like the above will not only fortify you against the death of your speech when your memory misses fire, but it will also provide an excellent training for fluency in speaking. *Stock up with ideas.*

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Pick out and state briefly the nine helps to memorizing suggested in this chapter.
2. Report on whatever success you may have had with any of the plans for memory culture suggested in this chapter. Have any been less successful than others?

3. Freely criticise any of the suggested methods.
4. Give an original example of memory by association of ideas.
5. List in order the chief ideas of any speech in this volume.
6. Repeat them from memory.
7. Expand them into a speech, using your own words.
8. Illustrate practically what would you do, if in the midst of a speech on Progress, your memory failed you and you stopped suddenly on the following sentence: "The last century saw marvelous progress in varied lines of activity."
9. How many quotations that fit well in the speaker's tool chest can you recall from memory?
10. Memorize the poem on [page 42](#). How much time does it require?